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By Diana M. Alba

LAS CRUCES — U.S. Sen. Tom Udall and Congressman Harry Teague, both D-N.M., on Monday toured deficient river levees in Doña Ana County that will be upgraded with an estimated \$72 million from the federal economic stimulus bill.

They stopped briefly at sites near the Picacho Avenue bridge and Mesilla Dam, where work to build up the height and solidify the levee structure is already under way using dollars appropriated before the stimulus bill.

Udall and Teague said 300 new jobs will be created during the construction with stimulus money.

"The end result is not only going to be a positive impact on the economy, but we're going to save people from having to buy flood insurance for their homes," Teague said. "It's building up the infrastructure in something that we're going to need for years to come."

Udall had similar thoughts:

"There are many communities on the edge of these levees that would be forced to buy flood insurance," he said. "That would be money out of their pockets that could be used in other, more productive ways."

The deficient levees along the Rio Grande have prompted properties throughout the county to be reclassified as high-risk flood areas. As a result, most homeowners who have mortgages will be forced to buy flood insurance, which can cost hundreds of dollars per year.

Levee repairs resulting from the stimulus bill funding should begin around September and wrap up in January 2011, said Bill Ruth, commissioner for the International Boundary and Water Commission, the federal agency that oversees the levees.

"This stimulus package will allow us to get this work done that probably would have taken us almost 20 years of funding through the normal process," he said. "But this money will allow us to get this done in the next 18 months, so it's a very positive impact for the local community."

But though significant upgrades are in the works, they're not halting a FEMA map certification process that's currently under way. The maps — which include the expanded floodplain created by the deficient levees — will be the basis for determining which property owners will have to begin paying flood insurance.

Also, FEMA has said previously that it wanted upgrades done to the entire length of Doña Ana County levees before it would consider them up to par.

But Al Riera, IBWC principal engineer for the levee repairs, said the commission, once it finishes portions of the work, plans to ask FEMA to consider removing areas behind those levees as being safe, instead of requiring that work along the entire system be completed.

Teague and Udall, who are in the state during recess of Congress, also visited a portion of levee system near Canutillo that will require more money to repair.